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# Her Unwelcome Husband

## By W. L. George

(Continued from Preceding Page)

object of his passion. Indeed, that afternoon, after chatter of plays, golf and the latest book of memoirs, wasting an hour on the sweepings of ideas which make up London conversation, he went away rather irritated. Patricia had not said much. Too busy, no doubt, but it annoyed him. Only once had she done anything personal. At something he said, and it wasn't brilliant, she had remained holding up the sugar tongs, looking at him intently. Then she had blushed, as if at her own thought, and this had moved him.

So it developed into an ordinary courtship, into the usual vanishing of social difficulties. Also, somehow, he wasn't progressing. It was as if his critical sense of Patricia's girlish imperfections held him back. Seen like this among London women, some of them so perfectly worked in white, black and crimson, so assured with their voices, so definitely placed when uttering definite points of view, she seemed—provincial. She was shy, and he hated her being shy, though he would have hated her bold.

Sometimes, when he thought of themselves married, he told himself that would be all right. She wouldn't be shy then and she'd learn to wear her clothes. He'd put that right, go to the dressmaker with her and tell her the things to say and help her to behave. It was very fascinating, that sort of daydream, and he liked to picture himself going to her bedroom in the morning, sitting on the bed and explaining to her the contents of the newspaper. Only one detail interfered with that particular vision. The occasional recurrence of a rather similar scene, where the head upon the pillow was black and smooth instead of curly brown.

He had not seen Mrs. Caldecot again. A month had passed and they had exchanged no letters, though often he had needed her, had been puzzled to decide some point where her instinct would have been helpful. But he had maintained his offended mood. He had been ill-treated and he wasn't going to take the first step. Now and then his isolation almost overwhelmed his pride. He needed a woman, if only to hold a woman's hand and gain a sort of lucidity from the contact.

He couldn't get that from Patricia, though he did love her—love her as a man does, as something to own. When he talked politics to her she always agreed with him; of course, he wanted women to agree with him, but not so easily. Rather than a woman to agree with he wanted a woman to convince. Patricia didn't know anything. Of course, she would when they were married; he'd educate her and make quite a different woman of her. That was charming, and he liked to dream of these intimations.

He nearly repeated his proposal that afternoon. He had taken her to a matinee, and as neither was dining out they had time to waste and walked home through the park. The sun had not yet set, but the twilight was falling like golden gauze, cut up by the buds that shone like jade on the sooty branches of the trees. As they went, the girl excited by the play, talking disjointedly of people they knew, of the actor who had played the comic butler, whom Patricia would like to take back to Wrayford, he was filled with a sense of her youth, with her unformed quality, and he delighted in it. Some question, now their familiarity was established, caused Patricia to let out with a laugh a little secret. It wasn't wonderful that Mrs. Neale troubled so little about her daughter. Mrs. Neale wasn't exactly engaged, but she did have a leaning toward—

"Not Chris?" asked Rodbourne, laughing.

"Yes," said Patricia. "It seems

funny, but everybody calls him Chris. After all, why not? He's not fifty, and if I must have a step-father, he's rather a dear."

Rodbourne did not reply until they reached the park, for they were crossing Hyde Park Corner, and he enclosed in one hand the slim forearm.

"Why not?" he said a little later as he pictured the smart though rather stout clubman whom everybody called Chris, which was a tribute to his amiability. But he said no more, for this talk of marriage embarrassed him. They passed Stanhope Gate before they spoke again, and Patricia felt awkward because she could think of no chatter.

As they went on Rodbourne was telling himself, "She's adorable. I don't think I'd like to have her different." In that moment he liked her imperfect clothes, her modest gaze, her hesitations. Opposite Aldford House he was thinking of a way to put it. He became agitated as they approached Marble Arch, for he didn't want to be blunt. Just as he was going to speak he observed a set of two couples upon a bench, close embraced and quite careless of each other. He thought, "I can't say it here. It seems so undignified." Then Patricia did the silly thing that girls do out of nervousness. She glanced sideways at the couples and remarked:

"Don't they look happy?"

"Very," said Rodbourne in a cold tone. How could she say such a thing? How could she notice them? She saw them, yes, she couldn't help that, but she needn't let on. It was almost vulgar. He rather disliked her as he left her at the house and they made no other appointment.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Neale, busy as she was considering Chris, had noticed what was going on. She would have said nothing about it, being wise enough to let her daughter do her own mating, if her friend Mrs. Palling had not opened the subject.

"I like you, new friend, Mr. Rodbourne," said Mrs. Palling, who though very heavy in body was very nimble in mind when it came to these things.

"Yes," said Mrs. Neale, "he's rather nice. We've only known him a couple of months."

"Patricia seems to get on with him so very well," said Mrs. Palling. "But I shan't give them a grand piano. Too expensive."

Mrs. Neale laughed. "Babe, you burn me up," having recently learned this expression from an American peeress. "That's all your imagination."

"Not at all. Every time I've been here he's been here; he's been seen with Patricia at the Independent Arts Show and he lunched her yesterday."

"Millicent, your intelligence department is wonderful."

"I can see what's before my nose," said Mrs. Palling. "But why do you deny it? Want him yourself? All right, all right; I'm not trying to be rude. I know you're not a Mormon."

"You've got it wrong, Milly. There are no female Mormons."

"Oh, aren't there?" said Mrs. Palling. "But that's not what I'm talking about; I mean to say, wouldn't he do?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Neale, "I've got nothing against him. He's quite brilliant and I hear they offered him the Harbor Office a month ago."

"He wouldn't take it," said Mrs. Palling, "because if he had he'd have been stuck in a minor office and the party would have thought they'd given him enough. He would have taken it if Tommy Doon had decided to take a peerage, because that would have cleared Mr. Rodbourne's way to the Cabinet. Only something happened that's too long to tell you. Tommy Doon's staying in the Commons and the Harbor Office wasn't worth while."

"Millicent, you really amaze me with the things you know. Can you

tell me whether Mr. Rodbourne has proposed to my daughter, and in case she has accepted him, do you know the day they've fixed for their marriage? It would be awfully convenient to know."

"Well," said Mrs. Palling seriously, "I don't know exactly, but I should say he proposed to her the other day when you were staying at May Headcorn's, and she refused him."

"But," said Mrs. Neale, ceasing to smile, "do you mean all this?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Palling; "it's like this. You know it's all over between him and Mrs. Caldecot?"

"I had heard something about them, though I wasn't sure."

"Of course it wouldn't get to Devonshire. But it's off, my dear. Mrs. Caldecot was dining somewhere where I was, and I don't know her very well; but she was so cheerful, she was the life and soul of the party, and I said to myself, that woman's done. Well, that was just after you came back. He dropped her at Cantrel Court."

"But what makes you think—and, of course, Patricia doesn't know anything about this?"

"No!" said Mrs. Palling. "She doesn't know, but she feels. I haven't got any daughters; you have, that's why you don't understand them."

"Oh," said Mrs. Neale after a time, "I see. You think that she refused him and now he won't take no for an answer—and that's why he's taking her about such a lot. I really ought to do something. Millicent; only Chris has been worrying me such a lot lately."

"Don't do anything," said Mrs. Palling impressively. "It seems to me a very good match; he's thirty-nine, yes, and she's twenty. It does make a difference, I know. But like that he won't get sick of her so early. He's quite well off. He's just sold fourteen hundred acres at Seton Manor for a very good price, my dear. And he'll be in the Cabinet. Besides, you'd be getting her out of the way for when you marry Chris."

Mrs. Neale laughed. One couldn't be offended with this gadabout. Also the last point of view appealed to her.

At the very end of April, for the first time since their parting, Rodbourne unexpectedly met Mrs. Caldecot. It was at one of those colossal at-homes in a house easily accommodating four hundred guests, where about six hundred had come and brought their friends. Halfway up the stairs he tried to turn round and go away, but the incoming crowd would not let him. So, ultimately, he was forced into the drawing room, exchanging grins and elbow jabs with a crowd that shrieked like parrots.

Suddenly a drift in the mob carried him against a marble pillar bearing a bust. Against the pillar, upon which she rested a gloved hand, Mrs. Caldecot was leaning, while she talked to a fresh-faced boy. Though separated by two women they saw each other. Mrs. Caldecot faltered and a rush of blood went up to her forehead. She began talking nonsense to the boy, who looked up at her with adoring eyes. He was eighteen and had never met anybody so beautiful as Mrs. Caldecot.

Rodbourne found himself smiling mechanically. His heart was beating. He knew that he must go up to her, shake hands, be normal. But he couldn't get to her just then because the two women were in the way, and so for a moment he looked at her, awaiting his chance.

The flush had died away; Mrs. Caldecot stood exactly under the chandelier where were burning some dozens of lights. The white glare struck her directly upon the forehead for she was wearing a little Russian-looking hat of black velvet with scarlet trimming. There was no b-l-m to protect her. She stood gabbling to the entrancing boy, while the light flung upon her chin shadows from the slightly pendulous cheeks emphasised the vertical folds about her mouth and darkened the sagging chin. When at last Rodbourne managed to get to her they had very little to say. Their hands released each other easily. She told him she was quite well. He said he hadn't taken the Harbor job after all. She said that perhaps he had been right. Then, that she must hurry away.

Rodbourne paused for a moment in Portman Square. His emotions were conflicting. She was very dear to him still; it had been good to clasp her hand, but he was oppressed by the marks he had seen, by a sense of ravage. She was old. She had grown old—not as a wife grows old, very slowly, in the same house, in the performance of the same tasks, in the pursuit of the same interests. It had not happened like that, in a way one could forgive if one noticed it. She had just grown old.

He stared through the railings into the square, and by degrees his unhappiness disappeared. Claire was old. She had released him. It was over. It was really over because she was old. Then he found himself drawing a breath of relief. The memory of Claire, of her sweetness—it was that that had enthralled him and set up a barrier between himself and Patricia. That barrier was down. Indecently in that moment he reacted violently from the past and thus turned toward the youth which Patricia offered him.

Oh, he had no doubts about it; he was man of the world enough to realize the effect that he, urbane, polished, sure of himself and splendidly mature, must make upon this girl, this little girl. So he hesitated no more, crossed the square, and within two minutes was at Mrs. Neale's door. Yes, Miss Patricia was in. The maid would see whether she'd gone up to dress yet.

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To Be Continued Next Sunday.



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